

London Exemplar 2011

ST. ANDREWS, Bow, LB Tower Hamlets Design Awareness for LB of Barking and Dagenham Councillors

Wednesday, 12 October, 2011



Event Context and Focus

London Exemplar is Open-City's design awareness programme for local authority decision makers. It addresses the challenge of securing design quality through targeted seminars and structured site explorations of recent exemplary architectural developments. This one-off Masterclass was commissioned as part of a training programme for councillors on Barking & Dagenham Council's Development Control Board. The aim was to raise design awareness amongst elected members now the Council had regained full responsibility for development control¹. The half-day focussed on:

- what is meant by design quality in specific contexts
- testing key design principles against real life examples
- analysing how drawings translate into reality
- practising arguing for/against a proposal on design grounds

¹ Previously the *London Thames Gateway Development Corporation* (LTGDC) had responsibility for development control of major applications across much of the borough.

The Exemplar Scheme

This is a 3-hectare site in Tower Hamlets, close to the Olympic Park. Previously occupied by St Andrews Hospital², the site is bounded by a railway line; busy elevated road; school, public park and modern housing. Barratt Homes won a competition to develop the site and their architects, Allies and



Morrison, produced a masterplan. The whole scheme has 964 dwellings, a health centre and a third of the site retained as public open space. In the first two phases, 50-70% of the housing was affordable³.

Introductory Sessions

Initial discussions covered:

- The principles of good design - firmness (will it last?), functionality (does it work?) and delight (does it look good?)⁴.
- The national planning policy framework.
- How design and economic, environmental and social sustainability relate;
- The need for collective decision making involving all uses/users.
- The need to constantly balance time, cost and quality.
- The seven characteristics of good urban design as described in *By Design*⁵.
 - *Character*
 - *Continuity and Enclosure*
 - *Quality of the public realm*
 - *Ease of movement*
 - *Legibility*

² Built 1871, the hospital closed in 2006

³ Phase 1 was designed by Allies and Morrison, phase 2 by Maccreanor Lavington and Phase 3 by Glenn Howells.

⁴ Known as the Vitruvian triangle

⁵ DETR, 2000

- *Adaptability*
- *Diversity*

Discussion session



When councillors looked at the application drawings. They identified the following issues:

- Whether the mix of housing types and tenures would generate a sense of community;
- The implications for school places of family housing;
- The nature of the public open spaces, and the internal private courtyards;
- Lighting of the public realm;
- The nature, scale and location of car parking;
- Whether design decisions would influence residents' 'behaviour' e.g.: bin store locations, cycle parking;
- Would the scheme develop a character?

Scheme Overview

Tower Hamlets' development control manager and Barratt Homes' development manager provided an overview of the proposals and public consultation, and Allies and Morrison's project director detailed the site constraints and their design responses.

The original buildings had been rejected for listing and it was decided not to keep them as they could not accommodate the number of dwellings required. The final design comprised three main parallel housing blocks, a new major public space, community facility and retail units which anchored the scheme to transport links.

At ground level there are family sized town houses with private gardens and all flats have some external private space- a garden, balcony or roof garden. All three completed blocks incorporate a mix of market and affordable housing

accessed off separate cores, all with access to landscaped secure communal space. The scale of the development is large but it has good accessibility, particularly with an underground station nearby. The scheme is largely car-free, with permits for on site parking limited.

Site walk-around



The site tour started with councillors able to consider the space standards of an affordable, dual-aspect, three-bedroom town house. Later, when inspecting a duplex two-bed private market-sale apartment, it found more stringent space standards with just a single aspect.

Councillors viewed the outside and courtyard faces of all three complete blocks, each by different architects. The concept was to balance the overall cohesiveness across the site with a variety of detail and materials. This was achieved through different finishes – brick colour and pattern, window details and style of balcony.

General points, and comments made by the group included:

- Overall there was a consistent, slightly angular, approach to massing and form with diversity of appearance achieved with a limited palette of materials
- The development had character, especially the balconies, some had patterns inspired by the Victorian ironwork of the previous buildings
- Specification of finishes looked down-graded in the third block (the most recently completed and perhaps affected by economic downturn?)



- Good space between blocks, although some courtyards felt better than others
- The Council was not responsible for open space and the responsibility of the new tenants' management company was unclear from the visit.
- Secure courtyards were fob controlled and continued security depends on tenants and resident self-management.
- Parking spaces on site were very limited. Enforcement will be required to avoid parking on pavements.
- It was questioned whether the units were adaptable enough for growing families (especially the small private sale units).
- Legibility was clear, but there appeared to be a lot of entrances.

Overall councillors were positive about the development but they had reservations about the lack of car parking, the impact on school places and internal space standards. They felt these points undermined an otherwise well designed scheme, such that it would be unlikely to achieve approval in Barking & Dagenham, although these were wider policy issues rather than scheme design choices.

Evaluation

Feedback from the councillors attending was positive and identified that they felt more confident with design issues and design language as a result of the masterclass, Councillors also expressed an interest in projects that combined housing and sustainability for future sessions. The main lessons learnt were:

- How to read and understand architectural drawings, and see how they translate to actual buildings.
- The importance of context and location, as key factors in the design process.
- The importance of choice of materials, texture and surface quality.